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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 001755

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL GG

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: SOME NON-PARLIAMENTARY PARTIES COME OFF THE STREETS, JOIN ELECTION LEGISLATION WORKING GROUP, ANNOUNCE MAYORAL CANDIDATE

REF: TBILISI 0523

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES A.I. KENT D. LOGSDON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary/Comment: Members of the Irakli Alasania-led Alliance for Georgia, Republican (represented by David Berznenishvili) and New Rights (represented by Mamuka Katsitadze) Parties followed political ally Irakli Alasania's earlier lead and joined the National Democratic Institute (NDI) sponsored Election Legislation Working Group (ELWG) on September 21. The meeting itself provided little substantive agreement and much of the time was spent debating various modalities, but the inclusion of two more non-parliamentary opposition parties is a positive development. Once again, Alasania appears to have played a constructive role behind the scenes, convincing the New Rights party that presenting an ultimatum to the ELWG in its initial appearance would be counterproductive. Moreover, Alasania and Christian Democratic Leader, Giorgi Targamadze are working together to some degree to coordinate their positions, which might provide a positive, moderate impetus to push the sometimes rancorous process forward. Additionally, Alasania announced on September 22, that he would run for Tbilisi mayor and added former Ombudsman Sozar Subari to his political team. End Summary/Comment.

New Rights and Republicans Join - Loathe to Give up Old Ways

¶2. (C) According to NDI Chief of Party Luis Navarro (strictly protect) negotiations were ongoing right up until the last minute as to whether and how New Rights and Republicans were going to enter the ELWG. New Rights initially wanted to present an ultimatum to the group proposing that opposition members not negotiate with the ruling United National Movement (UNM) until they had agreed on a consensus position. Only when a mutually agreed upon consensus among the opposition was formed would they negotiate with the ruling UNM. Navarro told Emboff that he was contacted by a very concerned Speaker David Bakradze, who had caught wind of the ultimatum and believed that New Rights was trying to scuttle the whole process. Navarro contacted Alasania and passed on Bakradze's (and others') concerns about New Rights' intentions. Alasania ultimately convinced New Rights that a confrontational approach with ultimatums was unhelpful. New Rights presented its proposal simply as food for thought, rather than a precondition to its participation.

Alasania Making His Move

¶3. (C) In the backdrop to the ELWG, both Irakli Alasania and Giorgi Targamadze told Poloff that they had been in regular communication to coordinate their positions on the upcoming municipal elections (scheduled for May 2010) as well as other issues. IRI Chief of Party, Andrea Keerbs (strictly protect) told Poloff that Alasania only discussed New Rights

and the Republicans as an afterthought if at all. Likewise, she said that New Rights and the Republicans were focused on their own party building. Navarro told Poloff that the Targamadze-Alasania discussions presented an interesting dynamic, potentially with the ability to drive a reform process forward. The UNM preferred a divide and conquer political strategy which would be much harder to achieve if the two most credible opposition leaders, one inside and one outside of parliament, presented a unified front on issues. Secondly, other more radical opposition leaders would be under pressure to join any Targamadze-Alasania agreement lest they be rendered even more obsolete and discredited as viable political actors. Navarro noted that joining any agreed Targamadze-Alasania initiative would be a tacit admission of accepting a subservient role that, in his opinion, would be a tough pill for many politicians to swallow.

¶4. (C) Alasania followed up on his political momentum after convincing New Rights and the Republicans to join the ELWG by announcing his candidacy for mayor of Tbilisi in upcoming elections in 2010. The announcement made him the first major player to throw his hat into the ring. Alasania's announcement also included the news that former Ombudsman, Sozar Subari would be joining Alasania's political party (Our Georgia - Free Democrats) and would be the party's candidate for Tbilisi city council chairman in the same 2010 local elections. (Embassy Comment: Subari's announcement was not a surprise to most political observers, but represents a good "get" for Alasania and helps broaden the image of the party beyond its "diplomats" foundation. End Comment.) Alasania also welcomed former presidential candidate Levan Gachechiladze's political ally Koka Guntsadze to his party.

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Alasania apparently did not consult with other opposition members before announcing his intentions. Other opposition leaders remained largely silent on the matter. The Conservative Party responded that it supported a primary system to pick a single opposition candidate for Tbilisi mayor.

ELWG, OK - Let's Agree to Argue

¶5. (U) The first hour or so of the Working Group was dominated by discussion of the New Rights suggestion that all opposition parties should have one unified position on the election code and then negotiate with the UNM. A number of participants noted that such an approach would likely render the ELWG process moot. A general agreement was finally reached that opposition parties were free to negotiate among themselves on the side but the NDI format for the ELWG should be maintained and followed. The next question to be debated was whether the Alliance for Georgia, made up of the Our Georgia - Free Democrats, New Rights and Republicans should get one vote as an Alliance or three as individual parties and if a vote was needed to accept the Republicans and New Rights as members. The ELWG ultimately decided that no vote was needed because, in principle, the only requirement to enter the ELWG was to sign the code of conduct and attend the meetings. The number of votes the Alliance should receive was not decided as the group chose to move on and discuss other issues.

¶6. (U) Jondi Baghaturia (Georgia's Troupe) who was serving as the chairman proposed his idea for party funding which would consist of a funding cap, 50 percent of which would be funded by the state budget, the other would have to be raised individually by the parties themselves. UNM representatives MP Akaki Minashvili (Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee) and MP Pavle Kublashvili (Chairman of the Legal Affairs Committee) said that the UNM would not accept a funding cap and that revisiting the question of government funding was a pointless exercise since the budgetary outlays to parties had already been made. The debate continued with the UNM representatives holding firm to their position so no

consensus was reached.

¶ 7. (C) Finally, the UNM gave its proposal for upcoming local elections. Kublashvili explained that the format for local elections would not be changed in the regions, only in Tbilisi. Tbilisi would be divided into 27 districts of equal numbers of voters. The districts would be single mandate districts with no first round threshold to form the city council. The opposition parties objected and suggested that a 50 percent threshold should be imposed. (Embassy Comment: The opposition objection to a threshold is largely to save them from themselves, knowing that the fractured opposition would run numerous candidates who would split the vote, likely giving a plurality to UNM candidates in most districts. End Comment.) After some discussion, most of the opposition figures agreed that the threshold question could be negotiated and that 30 percent to one-third of the vote could be agreed upon if other issues were addressed. When challenged on why only local elections in Tbilisi would be changed from the previous format, Kublashvili answered that if mayors were directly elected they would be too focused on politics rather than the nuts and bolts of administrating a city. Kublashvili explained that in Tbilisi politics could Qcity. Kublashvili explained that in Tbilisi politics could not be avoided so a directly elected mayor was acceptable -- an explanation which did not appear to satisfy anybody in the room. (Embassy Comment: The UNM's explanation as to why the Tbilisi model was not appropriate for other areas hardly passed the straight face test. The UNM will likely use the expansion of its proposed Tbilisi model to the regions as a bargaining chip. End Comment.)

Up Next

¶ 8. (U) The ELWG agreed to reconvene on Friday, September 25 and decided that the agenda will consist of a discussion on the election of the Chairman of the Electoral Commission, local election processes and voter list compilation.

LOGSDON